

The Clipper Visits Priscilla Harris

By MADDIE MERRIFIELD

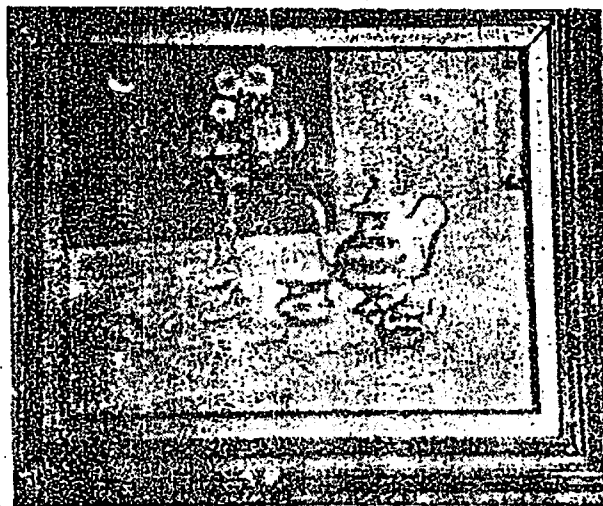
Tucked away in a far corner of Duxbury is a country road full of the charm of yesteryear, a quiet street lined with antique houses retaining the flavor of less hectic living. You will see sheep munching unhurriedly, hear a rooster crowing "good morning," smell the freshness of a meadow. High St. has that traditional New England rural atmosphere. It's no wonder that Priscilla Harris and her husband Ed decided 12 years ago to come back to the old homestead where she was born, restoring the antique house dated 1793.



The family homestead on High St., built in 1793.

Priscilla was born in the house "in the days when Duxbury had just one doctor, who came by horse and carriage. Of course, there was never any prenatal care in those days -- you were lucky if the doctor came for the birth."

Priscilla's father, a minister in Connecticut, "was a dreamer. At the time of the Alaskan gold rush, he was a divinity student in Chicago, and spent a summer panning for gold. It was a time of trying new things. When the cranberry industry was brand new, my father sneaked up from Connecticut without my mother knowing it, and bought land for a bog on Oak St. and the home on High St. (which had housed Aldens and Standishes in the past). So the family moved here from Connecticut, bringing all their belongings and a big crate full of chickens which got loose on the train."



Still Life, by Priscilla Harris

Priscilla's father worked hard to make a go of the bog, traveling by horse and wagon between home and Oak St., but it was never too successful. "It was a dry bog with no way to flood it. If there was an early frost, that was the end of the cranberries." Besides the bog, her father farmed the land and on weekends he would "snatch an old sermon from his files in the old rolltop desk and travel to Worcester or Fitchburg or Quincy to 'substitute' preach at one of the churches; I used to watch my father walk through the woods, wondering where he was going. Then we discovered that not far away was a 'Toonerville Trolley,' as we called it, connecting Plymouth and Brockton, where my father could catch a train."

With 600 hens, 6 cows, a pig, a horse, acres of corn and other vegetables, the family were all kept busy. High St. was part of the main road from Boston to the Cape at the time and it was at the family's roadside stand that the Joe Kennedys would stop to buy eggs and garden produce on their way to Hyannis. Priscilla had 2 articles published in the Clipper last winter about her memories of the Kennedys stopping there. After the articles appeared, someone sent Ted Kennedy a copy. He wrote the following letter to Priscilla in March: "Dear Mrs. Harris: I just wanted you to know how much I enjoyed reading your article in the recent Duxbury Clipper. Your recollections brought back many fond memories, which I certainly intend to share with my mother when I next see her. With my best wishes, sincerely, Ted Kennedy."

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Priscilla painted this Arab and his camel during their year's stay in Libya.

The Kennedys had given Priscilla's family a Newfoundland dog named Buddy, when they could no longer take care of him. The dog lived the rest of his life on High St., and occasionally Joe and Jack Kennedy would come by to visit him. Priscilla's family had the dog for 9 years before he died. She still has the metal tag from Buddy's collar, which bears the inscription: "Joe and Jack Kennedy, 181 Naples Road, Brookline, Mass. Lic. #1276." At a rally for Ted Kennedy in Marshfield several years ago, Priscilla spoke to Michael Kennedy, Robert's son, and showed him Buddy's collar tag. Michael was fascinated and said he'd heard stories from the family about the dog.

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High St. was not the main access road for long, however, and Priscilla was old enough to remember her father's outrage when the State announced it wanted 8 acres of the 40-acre property for the construction of Rte. 53. The State offered \$1400 for the acreage, and Priscilla's father termed it "highway robbery." "Highway Robbery," then, became the title of an article Priscilla wrote and had published in the May 1973 issue of Yankee magazine. The article, a humorous account of her father's dealing with the highway problem, was included in the 1977 issue of the book titled A Little Book of Yankee Humor. An excerpt:

One day he (Priscilla's father) came back from

Boston unusually sad and weary. "I've made a settlement. They won't pay me a cent more, but I got them to agree to move the road 100 yards nearer to the woods and not to split my henhouse in half. I told them it would be a hardship to have my farm split in half, so they're going to build me a cow-pass."

"A what?" we all chorused.

"They're going to build a tunnel under the road."

"Did you tell them you have only one cow?"

"They didn't ask how many cows I had."

The article continues, describing the folly of the endeavor, and ends with the following:

Last summer as my brother-in-law was heading towards Boston along Rte. 53 he saw several men and a cement mixer stationed near the old cow-pass. He stopped and asked them what they were doing there, and they answered, "We're going to fix up this old cow-pass. It's one of the few left in New England, and they say it has historical value." How many more hours they spent on it, I have no idea. I do know that if they had paid my father somewhere near what he wanted for his land, the State would have saved itself a lot of money.

"Ironically," said Priscilla, "the State ended up taking the bog by eminent domain, too, paying the same amount of \$1400. If my father had been living, he would have had a heart attack, for sure."

After high school, Priscilla left Duxbury and went to Massachusetts College of Art in Boston, where she developed her natural talents into professional quality. She worked for several years designing greeting cards for various companies, including Rust Craft. The paintings in her home reflect her outstanding talent, which she has shared as a teacher at the Duxbury Art Assn and in private lessons in her home. She has also prepared for publication a book titled Duxbury's Gates and Fences, full of detailed pencil sketches and researched information.

As far as her writing talent is concerned, Priscilla calls herself a "personal essay writer." "I do a lot of writing in my head -- but I fall short when it comes to putting it down on paper. My husband bought me a tape recorder to at least get my stories recorded, but I don't use it. What I need is an electronic band to go around my brain, and to record and type up my thoughts," she laughed.

Priscilla has lived in many parts of the country while her husband was in the service: Texas, California, Virginia and Florida. During the war when her husband was stationed in Virginia, she was one of the first 12 women taught to do sheet metal work for the Newport News Shipyard.

Priscilla had 3 children and was living in Hingham, "a typical suburbanite -- PTAs, Sunday school, scouts" -- when she felt "there's got to be more to life than this." She had made up a little phrase which seemed to fit her life at that time: "The more distractions, the fewer satisfactions."

One day she spotted an ad in the Globe for teaching overseas. Her husband had taught English, Latin and history and was guidance director at Cohasset High School. She secretly answered the ad, only to learn that single teachers, or teaching couples, were preferred. She gave up on the idea until a telegram arrived in July saying, "If you're still interested, call the Army base immediately." Her husband and 3 kids were eager to go, without a moment's hesitation.

Priscilla began packing trunks for their 2-year stay (which ended up being 3 years), while showing the house to prospective renters. Her husband's school was willing to give him a one-year sabbatical, but the Army demanded a 2-year commitment, so Ed quit his job. The children were 13, 9 and almost 5.

They got their shots, sold their car to buy clothes for 2 years (there were still shortages of everything in Europe because of the war).

Priscilla had always dreamed of going to England, so they were shipped to an Air Force base outside Liverpool. They were staying in the "Transient Hotel," (terrible little shacks on the edge of the base, left over from the war) until they found a little brick house in an English community 13 miles away. They had a tiny fireplace to heat the house, but coal was rationed, among other things, so they suffered through a miserable, rainy first year. "I felt so guilty, since it was my idea," said Priscilla. There was no refrigerator, barely any furniture. "We sat on upturned suitcases for ever so long." But despite the ghastly winter, they made some lifelong RAF friends and enjoyed many get togethers.

The second year they moved to a heated apartment outside London, across the street from the Henry VIII park, and were much more comfortable. They traveled in the summers to Scotland, Wales, Germany, Sweden, Holland, Belgium -- seeing as much as they could of Europe -- "even though we had only \$3 a day for meals for 5 of us!"

After their 2 winters in England, with Ed's pneumonia and the children's flus, they opted for a warmer climate. The Air Force was delighted with Ed's request and promptly shipped them to Tripoli in No. Africa, the biggest overseas base in the world -- where they learned there was a 100% turnover of teachers every year. They also learned of recent uprisings in the country and of the numerous transfer requests. Since Ed was a civilian, they couldn't get housing on the base. They finally found an apartment 6 or 7 miles away with a wall around the building, an iron gate and an Arab guard. They had no car, no phone, no means of getting local news, and with so much unrest in the country, they were "scared most of the time." Except for a few English wives, there was no one to communicate with, especially not the Arab women who were kept so backward. Across the street from Priscilla was a

cardboard novel where an Arab woman lived with her baby, covered with flies. Priscilla visited her once. The woman only peeked out of the sheet wrapped around her, giggling and pointing at Priscilla's jewelry. The Arab guard was furious to learn of the visit, as they didn't want their women influenced by Westerners. "It was like living in a gold fish bowl," said Priscilla, "the Arabs knowing our every move. The only place the children could play was on the roof. After that year, we were ready to come home, and I was content doing the most mundane things." While in Tripoli, Priscilla kept a journal, which she hopes to get into publishable form, called "The Libyans and Us." The Christian Science Monitor published a story she had written about life in the No. African schools.

Looking back, her 3 children think it was the best thing they ever did, as they all love to travel and seek new adventures.

As for Priscilla, she has come full circle. After living all over the country, indeed, in many parts of the world, she has returned to the family homestead. Her memories, and the talents she uses to express them to others, keep her days full to the brim. And the product of her talents will continue to bring pleasure to all who cross her path.



Drew Barber makes some extra money shoveling snow at school on his day off--Snow Day.

Photo by Deni Johnson